

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/8/2024 7:00:00 AM

First name: Laura

Last name: Makar

Organization: Pitkin County

Title:

Comments: Dear Deputy Forest Supervisor Edwards:

Please accept this letter as Pitkin County's public and initial cooperating agency comments on the United States Forest Service Draft Environmental Assessment ("EA") and Finding of No Significant Impact ("FONSI") (collectively "EA & FONSI").

Pitkin County stalwartly supports the 20-year mineral withdrawal for the delineated Thompson Divide Withdrawal Application area and the preferred alternative (Alternative A) detailed in the EA & FONSI. The requested withdrawal prevents fragmentation of the contiguous landscape, resulting in more efficient and effective administration of federally administered lands in the area and is essential to protect the agricultural, ranching, wildlife, air quality, recreation, ecological, and scenic values of the Thompson Divide Area for both intrinsic and economic value Pitkin County residents and visitors cherish.

The EA & FONSI is a well-supported result of grassroots, administrative, and legislative efforts to permanently protect an area of federal property interests in land within the Thompson Divide. The EA correctly recognizes the Thompson Divide is a largely pristine landscape, rare in the intermountain west, and is highly prized by sportsmen, sportswomen, ranchers and recreationalists of all kinds. It provides key grazing allotments, high-value wildlife habitat, and high-quality snowmelt-dominated headwaters that help furnish municipal, domestic, and agricultural water supplies. The area contains diverse, abundant native species and natural communities, as well as extensive, intact, and interconnected habitats. The socio-economic data section accurately reflects that uses in the Thompson Divide supports hundreds of jobs and tens of millions in annual economic activity. Much of the area is roadless and undeveloped, which is consistent with Pitkin County land use planning. The Thompson Divide is rare and exemplary at a comparative national scale and its uses are not compatible with oil and gas activity.

Over 60,000 letters were received on the withdrawal between the prior two comment periods. Consensus for protecting the Thompson Divide cuts across party lines, and has united citizens and local governments of the Crystal River Valley to a remarkable extent. Rarely, if ever, do you see the entirety of a community from ranchers and downstream farmers that depend upon the runoff, to bikers and snowmobilers, to hunters, anglers and hikers unite and agree on protection and restrictions on public lands. Our community is unified to see this land preserved for its existing values, and a 20-year withdrawal would provide important interim protection for the landscape and the communities that rely on it.

The EA importantly details the economic and cultural importance of recreation in Pitkin County. We also appreciate the inclusion agriculture in the breakout of employment by specific economic sectors. As discussed in the Grazing and Rangelands section, rangelands are an important piece to the way of life and socioeconomic vitality in the Thompson Divide area and its people and the area has been grazed for more than a century. We suggest the inclusion of agriculture as an important addition in the Pitkin County-specific socioeconomic section. Beyond the employment numbers in Table 1, agriculture is a significant factor in land use patterns and land ownership patterns in the Crystal River valley adjacent to, and within, the withdrawal application area.

Pitkin County wholeheartedly supports the proposed Thompson Divide Administrative Withdrawal and would welcome any discussion that might be helpful regarding our comments or expertise. We ultimately want move the preferred alternative forward in the most expedited manner possible and understand if no additional cooperating agency information is required.